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ABSTRACT

For an entire school year, two low-achieving severely learning disabled third-grade students ("Billy" and "Bonny") spent 30 minutes each day working with a Resource Room teacher on a variety of holistic activities. Activities were added, discarded, or modified to maximize the children's motivation and success. "Cut-up sentences" were used early in the school year. The children enjoyed this activity because they dictated whatever they wanted to say and the teacher did the actual writing. Language experiences stories was another activity that both children enjoyed. Predictable books were read every day. Using a variety of popular magazines, the children "wrote" environmental print books. The dialogue journal activity occurred in the children's regular third-grade classroom. Billy started off drawing in his journal, but by January he was writing stories with titles, illustrations, and "the end." Bonny's journal remained messy and disorganized throughout the school year. By the end of the year, Bonny's journal entries consistently expressed complete thoughts. During third grade, Billy seemed to become more confident in situations where he expected to succeed. Bonny progressed from scribbling and doodling to writing sentences, stories, and notes in collaboration and with many one-to-one demonstrations. Holistic instructional activities used with these learning disabled students resulted in more complex, competent language use. Bonny and Billy demonstrate the power of authentic activities which require language use to achieve personal goals. (Contains 25 references.) (RS)

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HOLISTIC INSTRUCTION WITH TWO SEVERELY LEARNING DISABLED STUDENTS

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HOLISTIC INSTRUCTION WITH TWO SEVERELY LEARNING DISABLED STUDENTS

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Holistic instruction assumes that language is learned whole to part through actual use, that the language learning process is constructive, self-generated, and creative, that children experiment, approximate, and discover language naturally and socially, and that language learning varies depending on social and cultural background.

Proponents of holistic instruction contend that there are no skills necessary for beginning readers which are not used by fluent readers. They further believe that those skills necessary for fluent reading are best learned by reading. Regarding writing they hold the same position--writing skills are learned by writing. (Cambourne, 1988; Edelsky, Altwerger, & Flores, 1991; K. Goodman, E. Smith, Meredith, & Y. Goodman, 1987; Holdaway, 1979; F. Smith, 1985).

When compared to fragmented skills-based instruction, it is believed that whole language instruction results in more genuine, meaningful, long-term

learning (Moffett & Wagner, 1983). However, traditional instruction for learning disabled students has been skills-based. It is well documented that learning disabled students spend little classroom time (McDermott, 1977; Allington, 1977) or special education time actually reading (Haynes & Jenkins, 1986; Leinhardt, Zigmond, & Cooley, 1981). For special education students, the opportunity to engage in oral and written language as part of purposeful, self-directed activity is secondary to repeated worksheet drills aimed at the mastery of isolated skills.

Whole Language with At-Risk Students

However, holistic instruction for learning disabled and low achieving students has proven successful. Bridge, Winograd, and Haley (1983) report that low-achieving first grade students learned more sight words using predictable books than did first grade students using a skill-based basal reading series.

In a study reported by Rhodes and Shannon (1982), children in a primary grade learning disabilities classroom in which a reading and writing program based on holistic psycholinguistic principles was employed the children's attitude toward reading and writing was improved.

Weir and Benegar (1985) found a similar change in their first grade

students' attitudes toward writing. By focusing on meaning rather than detection of errors, at-risk first grade students experienced the vital human need to communicate about personal, relevant topics. Out of this need developed the natural process of learning to read and write.

According to Cousins (1988), traditionally structured classroom events result in minimal and simplistic language which is expected of the stereotypical special education student. However, classroom events which include student choice, student interests, and opportunity for reflection and interaction with the teacher result in complex, proficient language typical of more capable learners.

Background Information

Specific holistic instructional activities were used with two severely learning disabled third grade students. In September Billy was eight years two months old and Bonny was eight years two months old. Both children could be considered "at-risk" from conception. Their school files as well as teacher and parent interviews contained references to premature birth, low birth weight, unstable family situations, physical, cognitive, and behavioral developmental delays, numerous school changes, abuse, pre-school services, ADHD referrals, special education referrals, summer school programs, and frequent school absences.

Their teacher noted specific behaviors which interfered with successful classroom performance: avoidance, passivity, hyperactivity, distractibility, talking out, anxiety, low frustration tolerance, and lack of confidence. Serious academic deficits such as little or no knowledge of letter/sound correspondence also made independent participation in class activities almost impossible for these two students.

For the entire school year, Billy and Bonny spent thirty minutes each day working with me in the Resource Room. Their reading/writing program consisted of a variety of holistic activities. Activities were added, discarded, or modified to maximize the children's motivation and success. Development of a positive attitude toward reading and writing seemed crucial. The following activities are those which were most successful based on the children's involvement and level of accomplishment.

Holistic Activities

Cut-up sentences (Clay, 1985) was used early in the school year. The children enjoyed this activity because they dictated whatever they wanted to say and I did the actual writing. They sometimes chose to trace the words with markers and they both said that they took them home and read them to younger siblings. These were simple for Billy to assemble when cut into whole words.

He was somewhat slower but still successful when sentences were cut into syllables or work clusters. He seemed to use context to reconstruct the sentences and then check for accuracy with the print clues.

These were difficult for Bonny to assemble even when cut into whole words and especially on the day following dictation. Bonny often seemed to forget what she had dictated. She did not appear to use context clues and could not use print clues because she did not recognize letters.

Language experience stories (Ashton-Warner, 1963; Stauffer, 1980) was another activity that both children enjoyed because they dictated and I wrote. They both relished the opportunity to talk about personal interests and experiences. Billy's stories often exceeded eight sentences in length. As I read them repeatedly, he became more familiar and semi-memorized them. In this way they became easier for him to read independently.

Bonny, however, had difficulty reading her own stories. She often forgot the topics as well as specific statements she had dictated. She could not match her spoken words to the print. Bonny's reaction to this activity remained positive as evidenced by her planning outside of class time and her requests to add information to stories previously dictated. In January she assumed authorship by adding the phrase by *Bonny (surname)*. This activity was phased

out after Christmas as both students showed increasing confidence and accepted responsibility for independent writing in the dialogue journals.

Predictable books (Rhodes, 1981) were read every day. Within the first few days both children learned to expect a pattern in the Story Box (1983) books and read these with no difficulty. Billy seemed to use context, pictures, and print clues as he read. Bonny relied on the pictures and therefore read accurately when the pictures and text left little room for choices. However, when the pictures and sentence pattern allowed more options per page Bonny seemed to name anything in the picture without verifying accuracy with the print. Her errors were always consistent with the cues provided by the pictures. Billy was able to progress to books with lengthier, cumulative text like Hairy Maclary from Donaldson's Dairy (1983). These were more difficult for him as he did not have the opportunity for enough repeated readings to commit the texts to memory.

I wrote a morning message (Crowell, Kawakami, & Wong, 1986; Poeton, 1993) in consistent letter format every day. This message always began, *Good morning, Boys and Girls (or Girls and Boys), Today is (day of week), month/date/year*. This was followed by information about school activities and personal experiences. The message always ended, *Let's get busy!*

Love, Mrs. James. Both Billy and Bonny learned the pattern of the text quickly and were able to correctly supply deleted words in the parts that remained the same every day. It was difficult for Bonny to supply missing words that made sense in context for the changing, middle part of the message. During our discussions she also revealed her confusion about days of the week and months of the year as well as question marks and exclamation marks. By the end of the school year both children had learned the term "abbreviation" for Mrs. and the use of a period when writing it. In addition Billy learned to spell correctly Mrs. James (The teacher).

Using a variety of popular magazines, the children "wrote" environmental print books (Meyer, Estes, Harris, & Daniels, 1991). While she recognized no words, Bonny wanted to cut out everything! I had the feeling that she rarely had access to magazines. It was difficult for her to focus and her plans seemed to change as she turned the pages. She tore out pictures and coupons to take home. Her dictated text ranged from single word labels to sentences. Bonny hurried through projects with the feeling that she would never have enough time. She used materials like glue, tape, and staples in excess, again giving the impression that she rarely had the opportunity to use such items.

Visibly excited when presented with motorcycle magazines, Billy also

gave the impression of having little exposure to magazines. He would have been happy to look at pictures and talk for hours. He seemed to recognize a few brand names and he also wanted to cut out everything. His text relied on the familiar sentence stems *I like* _____ and *I can* _____. He began by tracing my writing but within two weeks he took over the actual writing himself. Like Bonny, Billy rushed through the construction of these books. He expressed excitement at the thought of reading them to classmates and taking them home. Billy decided to copy the text from two of these books into his journal.

The dialogue journal activity (Staton, 1988) occurred in the children's regular third grade classroom. Three times weekly the children, their classroom teacher, and I wrote in spiral notebooks for fifteen to twenty minutes. We then gathered around the author's chair and volunteered to read entries. I answered all entries in writing, focusing on meaning rather than mechanics and spelling accuracy. In the written responses I modeled corrections so that they remained in the journal for future reference.

Billy's Journal

Billy drew pictures for a week, at which point I decided to insist on some writing. His earliest entries consisted of one-word labels and lines of cursive-

like marks, with most of his time spent drawing. A list of four names appeared at the end of September, and in October he wrote his first story, including the phrase *The End*. Throughout the fall Billy complained about having to write and continued to draw pictures whenever he could. It was necessary for me to sit near him because he asked for help constantly and also wanted to show what he had written or drawn. Rather than spell all of Billy's requests, I began to say "it has three sounds" as a clue for him to proceed. This worked for two and three sound words but not for longer words. He began to write more phonetic spellings and eventually could proceed on his own.

By January Billy was writing stories with titles, illustrations, and *The End*. From January to May he wrote nine stories which began, *The name of this story is* _____. *Once upon a time*_____... Independent writing along with invented spellings increased significantly after Christmas. In March Billy seemed consistently motivated to write. Interests included Dick Tracy and Nintendo. He was planning outside of school and coming to class ready to write. He sustained his writing of particular stories over a series of several days--up to sixteen days in May. This lengthy story began at the end of one notebook and continued into the new notebook. Billy insisted on carrying his filled journal with him for reference as he continued working on the story in the

new journal! He read back over the beginning of the story and planned new text as he wrote.

Bonny's Journal

At the beginning of third grade Bonny could write her name independently. She seemed to know no other conventional spellings and rarely copied environmental print. She did not attempt phonetic spellings because she did not know letter names or sounds. It was not possible to tell Bonny how to spell a word and rely on her ability to correctly form all of the dictated letters.

Bonny's journal was a model of disorganization. Throughout the school year it remained messy and out of sequence. Pages were lost and it was often difficult to locate an entry since she did not copy the dates onto pages correctly. Early in September Bonny worked diligently on filling pages with lines of cursive-like marks. She was often the last student to finish writing as she produced lines of different colored loops and crossed t's. Amazing to her teacher and me, Bonny volunteered to read in the author's chair in September. She hugged her journal to her chest and said, "I made circles and some cursive. The hearts are here to feel happy." In October Bonny's first unspaced word string appeared, including the words *I, Look, on*. Most writing was accomplished with one-to-one assistance from me or a classmate. We told

Bonny how to spell words and often showed her how to form specific letters. In November she wrote her first illustrated sentence: *I lost a tooth.*

In January Bonny began writing lists. At this time I decided to transcribe immediately her text onto the journal page because Bonny often forgot what she had written if any time elapsed between the writing and the transcribing. This allowed us to read what she wrote and also provided numerous models for her to use in her writing. Bonny became increasingly independent in her writing after Christmas. I observed her subvocalizing as she wrote words. Conventional spellings began to appear in her entries, including *on, the, look, dog*. At this time I began saying "it has three sounds" for particular words in an effort to increase her independence. While classmates were always eager to help Bonny, I began to remind them to let her try on her own before providing answers for her.

Bonny's journal entries increased in length during the spring. She and Billy entered into a conspiratorial partnership where they worked together and hid their writing from me until they were done. Bonny often copied what Billy had written. Billy assumed the role of teacher in their relationship and gained immensely in confidence because of it. In April and May Bonny's entries consistently expressed complete thoughts. I encouraged her to "write it like

you say it." Bonny began to write requests for food in her journal. I encouraged her to do this, hoping to convince her that writing is a tool for communication that she could use to reach personal goals. Once rewarded with popcorn, Bonny completed written requests for snacks every day. Even when I encouraged lengthier requests and said "write the whole thing--like you say it," Bonny never balked. More than anything this seemed to demonstrate the true power of written communication.

Progress in Third Grade

During third grade Billy seemed to become more confident in situations where he expected to succeed, including the resource room instructional activities, reading and writing in his journal, helping Bonny, and reading predictable texts. Billy's teacher was impressed with Billy's progress, saying "he went from *I can't* to writing extended journal stories." In May she said that Billy was spelling and writing more quickly and accurately, he was attempting more classroom assignments, he was helping Bonny in class, and for the first time he chose to read a book during free time.

As a third grader, Bonny progressed from scribbling and doodling to writing sentences, stories, and notes in collaboration and with many one-to-one demonstrations. Her awareness and use of environmental print increased.

While her knowledge of letter/sound correspondence was still not automatic, Bonny was able to attempt phonetic spellings and had learned several conventional spellings. Her teacher remembered that Bonny had written initial consonants in September and was spelling consonant-vowel-consonants in May. Doodling had evolved into label writing and invented spellings. Bonny was writing on the weekends and bringing it to school to show her teacher, and she was participating in more classroom assignments with assistance from classmates.

Summary

Holistic instructional activities used with learning disabled and low achieving students seem to result in more complex, competent language use. This type of instruction leads also to more fluent reading and writing coupled with greater understanding and a more positive attitude. In general, there appears to be more opportunity for successful school performance when instruction for low achievers is holistic rather than reductionist in nature. Bonny and Billy demonstrate the power of authentic activities which require language use to achieve personal goals. Their development shows that some students need more time, more demonstrations, more support, and more opportunities to engage in relevant language activities.

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